

CROSSING INTO THE BLUE

photo and story by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

From age 6 to 12, Staff Sgt. Zach McKinney toiled in the sweltering summer heat of Lubbock, Texas (pictured below with sister, Jessica Joy, in 1991). He picked cotton, laid irrigation pipe and drove a tractor on the 400-plus acre cotton farm owned by his grandparents.

"It was hard, honest work, and I never made a dime doing it," Sergeant McKinney said. "I just did what I was asked to do."

His father's job in the oil fields moved his family to Houston and later to Virginia, where the sergeant attended high school and a year and a half of college.

In July 2000, Sergeant McKinney decided to cross into the blue after hearing about his best friend training as a C-130 crew chief. His electrical skills landed him a guaranteed job in missile maintenance where he thrived.

He quickly garnered respect by earning senior airman below-the-zone and the John Levitow award in airman leadership school.

Seeking a new challenge in February of this year, Sergeant McKinney returned to the sweltering heat of Texas and the 326th Training Squadron at Lackland Air Force Base as a military training instructor, where he earned the Excellence in Instruction Award.

Given 40 new recruits and six week's time, Sergeant McKinney uses his enthusiasm, guidance and a well-earned work ethic to produce Airmen who are ready to do the same.

